

Iconographic Analysis –
Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints, by Domenico Ghirlandaio

Domenico Ghirlandaio was an important late quattrocento Renaissance artist who created large and magnificent frescos. The son of a goldsmith, he was also the teacher of a young Michelangelo¹. Ghirlandaio's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints* was painted for a church in Tuscany, and now rests in the Uffizi Museum in Florence. Completed in 1483 using tempera paint on wood, and standing at approximately six feet tall and wide, the painting is richly colored, highly symmetric, and densely packed with precise religious symbols and icons².

Madonna and Child was commissioned by the church of San Giusto, a church dedicated to St. Justus. Said saint, cloaked in a muted red robe, kneels to the bottom left of the enthroned Mary and infant Christ, across from St. Zenobius, wearing a similarly muted blue. Both saints wear gloves with the symbol of Christ's crucifixion visible on the surface. St. Justus most likely wears a different color than St. Zenobius to identify him as the one receiving the blessing, as the color is similar to that worn by the archangels Michael and Raphael, as well as Mary herself. Saint Justus shares a moment with the infant Christ, the two of them looking at each other, St. Justus with his hand on his chest accepting Christ's blessing.

Above the two saints, flanking Mary and Christ, are the archangels Michael to the left and Raphael to the right. The former can be identified via his armor and sword. Raphael, who is usually depicted holding a staff, is identified here via what looks to be a container of salve he outstretches towards Christ with his right hand. Michael keeps his gaze on Mary and Christ, while Raphael glances in an almost sideways manner to the viewer, inviting them to also bear witness to the scene unfolding before them.

Looking closer at Mary herself, she is seen in a fashion typical of many of her reproductions during and even after the Renaissance: red and blue robes, the infant Christ balanced on her knee, seated on a throne. Upon further inspection, there is an image of a sun sown into the left shoulder or Mary's cloak. This subtle yet powerful image represents the victory of light over darkness and can even allude to Christ's resurrection; a literal image of Him rising over the horizon again.

The altarpiece is organized very symmetrically, with similar symbols on either half of the painting. At the top of the painting, we see two groups of two tall and skinny trees in the background. More towards the top center are two larger fruit trees: to the left, a pomegranate tree, and to the right, an orange tree. Both fruits have varying meanings, but in this context and given the actual location of the fruit (at the very top of the composition, high in the sky above the other figures), the pomegranate can delineate eternal life in heaven. The orange can echo the meaning of the sun on Mary's lapel: Christ's resurrection and His triumph over evil.

In the background are four other angel figures standing in two groups of two consistent with the symmetry of the piece. Two of them seem to be poking their heads from behind the

¹ Campbell, Stephen J., and Michael Wayne Cole. *Italian Renaissance Art*. 1. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2017.

² Domenico Ghirlandaio. c. 1479-80. San Giusto Altarpiece, Virgin and Child with Saints Michael, Justus, Zenobius and Raphael. painting. Place: Galleria degli Uffizi. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/asset/SCALA_ARCH

pillars under which they stand in an almost playful like manner. The other two of them, closest to the viewer, each hold a stalk and flower of a white hibiscus flower. The flower itself is almost transparent, with one out of the three bulbs not fully in bloom. The color of the flower can represent the purity of the Virgin, while the transparency can allude to the fragility of life. These flowers are echoed again in the bottom middle of the composition, this time in a vase at the feet of Mary and Christ, and in between the two kneeling saints. The inclusion of these flowers in their exact position also guides the viewer's eyes around the entire painting, from the bottom middle, all the way to around to the left, top, right, then back down again.

Domenico Ghirlandaio created masterful frescos, and undoubtedly, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints* is an excellent addition to his already illustrious repertoire. It is filled with rich and meaningful symbols, from the large figures dominating the composition, down to the very pinpoints of the dotting of the painted columns. These figures all come together to create a fantastic image worthy of close study and worship.

Bibliography

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